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Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction (review)

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*Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction*. By Sor-hoon Tan. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003. Pp. viii + 256. Hardcover \$65.50. Paperback \$22.95.

Reviewed by **Joseph Grange** University of Southern Maine

Globalization is now a buzzword that may well be dying the slow death of a lack of meaning brought on by overuse. In *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction*, Sor-hoon Tan offers a brilliant essay in comparative philosophy that single-handedly restores depth, nuance, and importance to this still key concept. She does so through a meticulous engagement with the best of scholarship on Confucius and Dewey, and in the process she also uncovers new layers of significance in the works of these two giants of thought. Her analysis is lucid, exhaustive, and very much on the mark insofar as there is the possibility of reconstructing a Confucian democracy that will work for contemporary Asian forms of government. All in all her book is a remarkable achievement and one that will prove invaluable as the meaning of "global philosophy" evolves over the coming decades. *Confucian Democracy* is destined to become a source book for all those who think seriously about the ethical and political issues emerging from the possibilities presented by Asia's rise to political and economic prominence.

A list of some of the subjects covered in this book underscores my point. Tan deals with questions of individual rights and liberties, the construction of democratic communities, the relations between power and authority, and, most importantly, the impossibility of separating the ethical from the political in discussions of the future of democracy in Asian contexts. And she does all this by weaving a formidable argument derived from the most careful analyses of the major points of Confucian and Deweyan philosophy. Her aim is to follow Dewey by taking seriously his demand that philosophy reconstruct itself in the light of new problems, contexts, and situations. She also demonstrates that such a labor of continual revision is part and parcel of Confucius' program of education. The warp and woof of this reweaving of the thought of two classic philosophers separated by more than 2,500 years consists in the necessary connection between forms of the good and social structures. This places her (and them) in opposition to the forms of liberalism and authoritarianism that presently dominate political philosophy. By showing just how impossible it is to ignore ethics when dealing with power structures she undermines most of the political agendas presently dominating the world's cultural landscape.

As the Iraq fiasco has proved, democracy is no innocent concept. It, too, has its power center, hidden agendas, and clandestine motivations. What enables Tan to expose these fault lines that so quickly turn into invisible modes of oppression is her commitment to a Confucian sensitivity to the social roots of every human being (*ren*) and her equally firm commitment to Dewey's insistence that what is most important in associated living is the context within which human beings struggle to grow. Thus, democracy comes in for a thorough washing of its dirty linen. Given our common planetary future, this is all to the good. A common complaint against

Confucius is that he is a member of a power elite that expresses itself through an insufferable Mandarin smugness. The usual charge brought against Dewey is that he always fudges the issues by seeking compromise solutions. The Chinese sage has come to stand for an authoritarian social philosophy; the American wise man does not stand for anything clearly discernible. Tan's examination of the topics mentioned at the beginning of this review demonstrates just how wrongheaded such judgments really are.

Wherever one begins with these problems, other dimensions of the thought of Confucius and Dewey must be taken into consideration. Thus the issue of individual rights and liberties demands that we look at the Confucian and Deweyan notions of the individual. Both are in agreement that no human self arises by itself or exists through its own efforts. We are all children of the special circumstances and conditions into which we were born. Looming in all the discussions about "inalienable human rights" is the actual presence of a field of social relations that constitute our existential matrix. One focus in this field could very well be the problem of individual rights, but that perspective inevitably mixes with other social and cultural demands. Thus, claims of "inalienable" rights are in their own way "alien" to both thinkers. Neither Confucius nor, 2,500 years later, Dewey would approve of absolute rights. The reason for this is that every human being is also social and has duties to her own social and cultural environment. No aspect of this way of thinking can be legitimately used to strip individuals of their rights. But rights must be viewed as rising out of situations, and their use and justification must refer back to the conditions under which they occurred. Otherwise, one is continually committing what Whitehead called "the fallacy of simple location"; that is to say, it is a fundamental error of reason to view any event in a changing universe as absolutely separated from other fields of being. Humans occupy domains of influence and creativity that crisscross other regions of value, and these other realities must also be considered.

Does this portend a society of robots who must slavishly carry out the commands of masters? It is here that Tan shows her mastery of both the Confucian and pragmatic traditions. What is at stake in the life span of individuals is not their simpleminded adherence to social codes but rather their ability to become who they *uniquely* are. It is the duty of the social order to provide the means whereby such growth can occur. The failure of individuals to grow is as much a sign of social injustice as it is of individual human weakness. Thus, the coherence of Tan's argument shows itself in the obligation to build orders of social harmony that assist in the reconstruction of democratic institutions. This conclusion so foreign to ways of empire (be they Chinese or Western) follows inevitably from the philosophical foundations laid out by Confucius and Dewey. The words of her title, *Confucian Democracy* and *Deweyan Reconstruction*, nicely capture the range of thought covered in this magnificent book. If the definition of coherence is the need to capture the meaning of each thought by relating it to all others, then this study has produced a coherent and applicable approach to the problems of human government.

Turning to the remaining themes mentioned above, we see the ways in which questions of power and authority as well as the relation of ethics and politics would

be handled by Confucius and/or Dewey. Power can be accumulated and used by anyone ruthless and clever enough to carry out a program of despotism. There is nothing admirable in such behavior. Authority in both the Confucian and Deweyan tradition is an entirely different matter. It is to be understood in terms of the ways in which a person comports herself in the world. In other words, the meaning of authority is to be sought in the origins of the term itself: to have authority is to have the power to act creatively in human situations. Thus the relation between power and authority is to be found in the manner in which power is used to solve problems in new and unthought-of ways. At this point in the reconstruction of a Confucian democracy, the importance of intelligence as the controlling factor in human behavior emerges. Here Dewey had an advantage over Confucius since he (as Confucius was not) was heir to a great and growing scientific tradition. Dewey called it "inquiry," and by it he meant the collective human enterprise of finding "good" solutions to human predicaments. I stress the concept of the good because it signals the primacy of ethics over politics in the thinking of Dewey and Confucius. Both thinkers firmly resolve the philosophical quarrel between the right and the good in favor of the good. For Confucius this means that excellence in ethical, political, and social affairs must mutually reinforce each other. For Dewey this means that the good should function as a constant stimulus toward growth in personal and social terms. Confucius would see the path toward the good as paved with good ritual performances that would be heartfelt enactments of *li*. In this way the social code would find authoritative expression as a lure for others to follow. Dewey would envision growth as a never-ending process of creating, balancing, and expressing new connections in the associated lives of citizens.

I have not done full justice to the quality of this study in comparative philosophy. There is only so much one can say in a review like this about a work so packed with careful scholarship, sharp arguments, and wise observations. Sor-hoon Tan has written a clear and compelling book that carefully leads us step-by-step through the thorny thickets of social psychology, political theory, classical Confucian scholarship, and the most up-to-date interpretations of the contemporary significance of John Dewey. It is truly a signal study—one that will lead the way when the time comes for the East and West to collaborate as partners in the human quest for a better and more fulfilling social existence.

There are those who will mount the expected but by now old and hoary charges of "idealized" thinking that ignores the question of *realpolitik* and the dark side of human nature. But Tan (along with Confucius and Dewey) has an answer that effectively silences such critics. She unfailingly stresses how much hard work goes into such a reconstruction of democracy. We are not here talking about a "workers' paradise" or an immediate decision by the international community to give up market capitalism for the sake of an enlightened practice of *li*. It will take real intellectual labor and authentic cooperation to bring about the revolution in human affairs envisioned by Tan. At the very least she has painted a clear picture of what it will take to move the process of globalization toward a more democratic society that encourages both fairness and individual uniqueness.